BUCK CHARLES NEVILLE

THE KEY TO YESTERDAY

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The palings of the grandstand inclosure creaked in protest under the pressure. The shadows of forward-surging men wavered far out across the track. A smother of ondriving dust broke, hurricane-like, around the last turn, sweeping before it into the straightaway a struggling mass of horse-flesh and a confusion of stable-colors. Back to the right, the grandstand came to its feet, bellowing in a madman's chorus.

Out of the forefront of the struggle strained a blood-bay colt. The boy, crouched over the shoulders, was riding with hand and heel to the last ounce of his strength and the last subtle feather-weight of his craft and skill. At his saddleskirts pressed a pair of distended nostrils and a black, foam-flecked muzzle. Behind, with a gap of track and daylight between, trailed the laboring "ruck."

A tall stranger, who had lost his companion and host in the maelstrom of the betting shed, had taken his stand near the angle where the paddock grating meets the track fence. A Derby crowd at Churchill Downs is a congestion of humanity, and in the obvious impossibility of finding his friend he could here at

least give his friend the opportunity of finding him, since at this point were a few panels of fence almost clear. As the two colts fought out the final decisive furlongs, the black nose stealing inch by inch along the bay neck, the stranger's face wore an interest not altogether that of the casual race-goer. His shoulders were thrown back, and his rather lean jaw angle swept into an uncompromising firmness of chin – just now uptilted.

The man stood something like six feet of clear-cut physical fitness. There was a declaration in his breadth of shoulder and depth of chest, in his slenderness of waist and thigh, of a life spent only partly within walls, while the free swing of torso might have intimated to the expert observer that some of it had been spent in the saddle.

Of the face itself, the eyes were the commanding features. They were gray eyes, set under level brows; keenly observant by token of their clear light, yet tinged by a half-wistful softness that dwells hauntingly in the eyes of dreamers.

Just now, the eyes saw not only the determination of a four-furlong dash for two-year-olds, but also, across the fresh turf of the infield, the radiant magic of May, under skies washed brilliant by April's rains.

Then, as the colts came abreast and passed in a muffled roar of drumming hoofs, his eyes suddenly abandoned the race at the exact moment of its climax: as hundreds of heads craned toward the judges' stand, his own gaze became a stare focused on a point near his elbow.

He stared because he had seen, as it seemed to him, a miracle, and the miracle was a girl. It was, at all events, nothing short of miraculous that such a girl should be discovered standing, apparently unaccompanied, down in this bricked area, a few yards from the paddock and the stools of the bookmakers.

Unlike his own, her eyes had remained constant to the outcome of the race, and now her face was averted, so that only the curve of one cheek, a small ear and a curling tendril of brown hair under the wide, soft brim of her Panama hat rewarded him for the surrender of the spectacle on the track.

Most ears, he found himself reflecting with, a sense of triumphant discovery, simply grow on the sides of heads, but this one might have been fashioned and set by a hand gifted with the exquisite perfection of the jeweler's art.

A few moments before, the spot where she stood had been empty save for a few touts and trainers. It seemed inconceivable, in the abrupt revelation of her presence, that she could, like himself, have been simply cut off from companions and left for the interval waiting. He caught himself casting about for a less prosaic explanation. Magic would seem to suit her better than mere actuality. She was sinuously slender, and there was a splendid hint of gallantry in the unconscious sweep of her shoulders. He was conscious that the simplicity of her pongee gown loaned itself to an almost barbaric freedom of carriage with the same readiness as do the draperies of the Winged Victory. Yet, even the Winged Victory achieves her grace by a pose of

triumphant action, while this woman stood in repose except for the delicate forward-bending excitement of watching the battle in the stretch.

The man was not, by nature, susceptible. Women as sex magnates had little part in his life cosmos. The interest he felt now with electrical force, was the challenge that beauty in any form made upon his enthusiasm. Perhaps, that was why he stood all unrealizing the discourtesy of his gaping scrutiny – a scrutiny that, even with her eyes turned away, she must have felt.

At all events, he must see her face. As the crescendo of the grandstand's suspense graduated into the more positive note of climax and began to die, she turned toward him. Her lips were half-parted, and the sun struck her cheeks and mouth and chin into a delicate brilliance of color, while the hat-brim threw a band of shadow on forehead and eyes. The man's impression was swift and definite. He had been waiting to see, and was prepared. The face, he decided, was not beautiful by the gauge of set standards. It was, however, beautiful in the better sense of its individuality; in the delicacy of the small, yet resolute, chin and the expressive depth of the eyes. Just now, they were shaded into dark pools of blue, but he knew they could brighten into limpid violet.

She straightened up as she turned and met his stare with a steadiness that should have disconcerted it, yet he found himself still studying her with the detached, though utterly engrossed, interest of the critic. She did not start or turn hurriedly away. Somehow, he caught the realization that flight had no part in her

system of things.

The human tide began flowing back toward the betting shed, and left them alone in a cleared space by the palings. Then, the man saw a quick anger sweep into the girl's face and deepen the color of her cheeks. Her chin went up a trifle, and her lips tightened.

He found himself all at once in deep confusion. He wanted to tell her that he had not realized the actuality of his staring impertinence, until she had, with a flush of unuttered wrath and embarrassment, revealed the depth of his felony … for he could no longer regard it as a misdemeanor.

There was a note of contempt in her eyes that stung him, and presently he found himself stammering an excuse.

"I beg your pardon – I didn't realize it," he began lamely. Then he added as though to explain it all with the frank outspokenness of a school-boy: "I was wishing that I could paint you – I couldn't help gazing."

For a few moments as she stood rigidly and indignantly silent, he had opportunity to reflect on the inadequacy of his explanation. At last, she spoke with the fine disdain of affronted royalty.

"Are you quite through looking at me? May I go now?"

He was contrite.

"I don't know that I could explain – but it wasn't meant to be – to be – " He broke off, floundering.

"It's a little strange," she commented quietly as though talking

to herself, "because you *look* like a gentleman."

The man flushed.

"You are very kind and flattering," he said, his face instantly hardening. "I sha'n't tax you with explanation. I don't suppose any woman could be induced to understand that a man may look at her – even stare at her – without disrespect, just as he might look at a sunset or a wonderful picture." Then, he added half in apology, half in defiance: "I don't know much about women anyway."

For a moment, the girl stood with her face resolutely set, then she looked up again, meeting his eyes gravely, though he thought that she had stifled a mutinous impulse of her pupils to riffle into amusement.

"I must wait here for my uncle," she told him. "Unless you have to stay, perhaps you had better go."

The tall stranger swung off toward the betting shed without a backward glance, and engulfed himself in the mob where one had to fight and shoulder a difficult way in zigzag course.

Back of the forming lines of winners with tickets to cash, he caught sight of a young man almost as tall as himself and characterized by the wholesome attractiveness of one who has taken life with zest and decency. He wore also upon feature and bearing the stamp of an aristocracy that is not decadent. To the side of this man, the stranger shouldered his way.

"Since you abandoned me," he accused, "I've been standing out there like a little boy who has lost his nurse." After a pause,

he added: “And I’ve seen a wonderful girl – the one woman in your town I want to meet.”

His host took him by the elbow, and began steering him toward the paddock gate.

“So, you have discovered a divinity, and are ready to be presented. And you are the scoffer who argues that women may be eliminated. You are – or were – the man who didn’t care to know them.”

The guest answered calmly and with brevity:

“I’m not talking about women. I’m talking about a woman – and she’s totally different.”

“Who is she, Bob?”

“How should I know?”

“I know a few of them – suppose you describe her.”

The stranger halted and looked at his friend and host with commiserating pity. When he deigned to speak, it was with infinite scorn.

“Describe her! Why, you fool, I’m no poet laureate, and, if I were, I couldn’t describe her!”

For reply, he received only the disconcerting mockery of ironical laughter.

“My interest,” the young man of the fence calmly deigned to explain, “is impersonal. I want to meet her, precisely as I’d get up early in the morning and climb a mountain to see the sun rise over a particularly lovely valley. It’s not as a woman, but as an object of art.”

On other and meaner days, the track at Churchill Downs may be in large part surrendered to its more rightful patrons, the chronics and apostles of the turf, and racing may be only racing as roulette is roulette. But on Derby Day it is as though the community paid tribute to the savor of the soil, and honored in memory the traditions of the ancient régime.

To-day, in the club-house inclosure, the roomy verandahs, the close-cropped lawn and even the roof-gallery were crowded; not indeed to the congestion of the grandstand's perspiring swarm, for Fashion's reservation still allowed some luxury of space, but beyond the numbers of less important times. In the burgeoning variety of new spring gowns and hats, the women made bouquets, as though living flowers had been brought to the shrine of the thoroughbred.

A table at the far end of the verandah seemed to be a little Mecca for strolling visitors. In the party surrounding it, one might almost have caught the impression that the prettiness of the feminine display had been here arranged, and that in scattering attractive types along the front of the white club-house, some landscape gardener had reserved the most appealing beauties for a sort of climacteric effect at the end.

Sarah and Anne Preston were there, and wherever the Preston sisters appeared there also were usually gathered together men, not to the number of two and three, but in full quorum. And, besides the Preston sisters, this group included Miss Buford and a fourth girl.

Indeed, it seemed to be this fourth who held, with entire unconsciousness, more than an equal share of attention. Duska Filson was no more cut to the pattern of the ordinary than the Russian name her romantic young mother had given her was an exponent of the life about her. She was different, and at every point of her divergence from a routine type it was the type that suffered by the contrast. Having preferred being a boy until she reached that age when it became necessary to bow to the dictate of Fate and accept her sex, she had retained an understanding for, and a comradeship with, men that made them hers in bondage. This quality she had combined with all that was subtly and deliciously feminine, and, though she loved men as she loved small boys, some of them had discovered that it was always as men, never as a man.

She had a delightfully refractory way of making her own laws to govern her own world – a system for which she offered no apology; and this found its vindication in the fact that her world was well-governed – though with absolutism.

The band was blaring something popular and reminiscent of the winter's gayeties, but the brasses gave their notes to the May air, and the May air smoothed and melted them into softness. Duska's eyes were fixed on the green turf of the infield where several sentinel trees pointed into the blue.

Mr. Walter Bellton, having accomplished the marvelous feat of escaping from the bookmaker's maelstrom with the immaculateness of his personal appearance intact, sauntered up

to drop somewhat languidly into a chair.

"When one returns in triumph," he commented, "one should have chaplets of bay and arches to walk under. It looks to me as though the reception-committee has not been on the job."

Sarah Preston raised a face shrouded in gravity. Her voice was velvety, but Bellton caught its undernote of ridicule.

"I render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's – but what is your latest triumph?" She put her question innocently. "Did you win a bet?"

If Mr. Bellton's quick-flashing smile was an acknowledgment of the thrust at his somewhat notorious self-appraisement, his manner at least remained imperturbably complacent.

"I was not clamoring for my own just dues," he explained, with modesty. "For myself, I shall be satisfied with an unostentatious tablet in bronze when I'm no longer with you in the flesh. In this instance I was speaking for another."

He did not hasten to announce the name of the other. In even the little things of life, this gentleman calculated to a nicety dramatic values and effects. Just as a public speaker in nominating a candidate works up to a climax of eulogy, and pauses to let his hearers shout, "Name him! Name your man!" so Mr. Bellton paused, waiting for someone to ask of whom he spoke.

It was little Miss Buford who did so with the débutante's legitimate interest in the possibility of fresh conquest.

"And who has returned in triumph?"

"George Steele."

Sarah Preston arched her brows in mild interest.

"So, the wanderer is home! I had the idea he was painting masterpieces in the *Quartier Latin*, or wandering about with a sketching easel in southern Spain."

"Nevertheless, he is back," affirmed the man, "and he has brought with him an even greater celebrity than himself – a painter of international reputation, it would seem. I met them a few moments ago in the paddock, and Steele intimated that they would shortly arrive to lay their joint laurels at your feet."

Louisville society was fond of George Steele, and, when on occasion he dropped back from "the happy roads that lead around the world," it was to find a welcome in his home city only heightened by his long absence.

"Who is this greater celebrity?" demanded Miss Buford. She knew that Steele belonged to Duska Filson, or at least that whenever he returned it was to renew the proffer of himself, even though with the knowledge that the answer would be as it had always been: negative. Her interest was accordingly ready to consider in alternative the other man.

"Robert A. Saxon – the first disciple of Frederick Marston," declared Mr. Bellton. If no one present had ever heard the name before, the consequential manner of its announcement would have brought a sense of deplorable unenlightenment.

Bellton's eyes, despite the impression of weakness conveyed by the heavy lenses of his nose-glasses, missed little, and he saw

that Duska Filson still looked off abstractedly across the bend of the homestretch, taking no note of his heralding.

"Doesn't the news of new arrivals excite you, Miss Filson?" he inquired, with a touch of drawl in his voice.

The girl half-turned her head with a smile distinctly short of enthusiasm. She did not care for Bellton. She was herself an exponent of all things natural and unaffected, and she read between the impeccably regular lines of his personality, with a criticism that was adverse.

"You see," she answered simply, "it's not news. I've seen George since he came."

"Tell us all about this celebrity," prompted Miss Buford, eagerly. "What is he like?"

Duska shook her head.

"I haven't seen him. He was to arrive this morning."

"So, you see," supplemented Mr. Bellton with a smile, "you will, after all, have to fall back on me – I have seen him."

"You," demurred the débutante with a disappointed frown, "are only a man. What does a man know about another man?"

"The celebrity," went on Mr. Bellton, ignoring the charge of inefficiency, "avoids women." He paused to laugh. "He was telling Steele that he had come to paint landscape, and I am afraid he will have to be brought lagging into your presence."

"It seems rather brutal to drag him here," suggested Anne Preston. "I, for one, am willing to spare him the ordeal."

"However," pursued Mr. Bellton with some zest of recital, "I

have warned him. I told him what dangerous batteries of eyes he must encounter. It seemed to me unfair to let him charge into the lists of loveliness all unarmed – with his heart behind no shield."

"And he … how did he take your warning?" demanded Miss Buford.

"I think it is his craven idea to avoid the danger and retreat at the first opportunity. He said that he was a painter, had even been a cow-puncher once, but that society was beyond his powers and his taste."

The group had been neglecting the track. Now, from the grandstand came once more the noisy outburst that ushers the horses into the stretch, and conversation died as the party came to its feet.

None of its members noticed for the moment the two young men who had made their way between the chairs of the verandah until they stood just back of the group, awaiting their turn for recognition.

As the horses crossed the wire and the pandemonium of the stand fell away, George Steele stepped forward to present his guest.

"This is Mr. Robert Saxon," he announced. "He will paint the portraits of you girls almost as beautiful as you really are… It's as far as mere art can go."

Saxon stood a trifle abashed at the form of presentation as the group turned to greet him. Something in the distance had caught Duska Filson's imagination-brimming eyes. She was sitting with

her back turned, and did not hear Steele's approach nor turn with the others.

Saxon's casually critical glance passed rapidly over the almost too flawless beauty of the Preston sisters and the flower-like charm of little Miss Buford, then fell on a slender girl in a simple pongee gown and a soft, wide-brimmed Panama hat. Under the hat-brim, he caught the glimpse of an ear that might have been fashioned by a jeweler and a curling tendril of brown hair. If Saxon had indeed been the timorous man Bellton intimated, the glimpse would have thrown him into panic. As it was, he showed no sign of alarm.

His presentation as a celebrity had focused attention upon him in a manner momentarily embarrassing. He found a subtle pleasure in the thought that it had not called this girl's eyes from whatever occupied them out beyond the palings. Saxon disliked the ordinary. His canvases and his enthusiasms were alike those of the individualist.

"Duska," laughed Miss Buford, "come back from your dreams, and be introduced to Mr. Saxon."

The painter acknowledged a moment of suspense. What would be her attitude when she recognized the man who had stared at her down by the paddock fence?

The girl turned. Except himself, no one saw the momentary flash of amused surprise in her eyes, the quick change from grave blue to flashing violet and back again to grave blue. To the man, the swiftly shifting light of it seemed to say: "You are at my

mercy; whatever liberality you receive is at the gift and pleasure of my generosity."

"I beg your pardon," she said simply, extending her hand. "I was just thinking – " she paused to laugh frankly, and it was the music of the laugh that most impressed Saxon – "I hardly know what I was thinking."

He dropped with a sense of privileged good-fortune into the vacant chair at her side.

With just a hint of mischief riffling her eyes, but utter artlessness in her voice, she regarded him questioningly.

"I wonder if we have not met somewhere before? It seems to me – "

"Often," he asserted. "I think it was in Babylon first, perhaps. And you were a girl in Macedon when I was a spearman in the army of Alexander."

She sat as reflective and grave as though she were searching her recollections of Babylon and Macedon for a chance acquaintance, but under the gravity was a repressed sparkle of mischievous delight.

After a moment, he demanded brazenly:

"Would you mind telling me which colt won that first race?"

CHAPTER II

"His career has been pretty much a march of successive triumphs through the world of art, and he has left the critics only one peg on which to hang their carping."

Steele spoke with the warmth of enthusiasm. He had succeeded in capturing Duska for a few minutes of monopoly in the semi-solitude of the verandah at the back of the club-house. Though he had a hopeless cause of his own to plead, it was characteristic of him that his first opportunity should go to the praise of his friend.

"What is that?" The girl found herself unaccountably interested and ready to assume this stranger's defense even before she knew with what his critics charged him.

"That he is a copyist," explained the man; "that he is so enamored of the style of Frederick Marston that his pictures can't shake off the influence. He is great enough to blaze his own trail – to create his own school, rather than to follow in the tracks of another. Of course," he hastened to defend, "that is hardly a valid indictment. Every master is, at the beginning of his career, strongly affected by the genius of some greater master. The only mistake lies in following in the footsteps of one not yet dead. To play follow-the-leader with a man of a past century is permissible and laudable, but to give the same allegiance to a contemporary is, in the narrow view of the critics, to accept a secondary place."

The Kentuckian sketched with ardor the dashing brilliance of the other's achievement: how five years had brought him from lethal obscurity to international fame; how, though a strictly American product who had not studied abroad, his *Salon* pictures had electrified Paris. And the girl listened with attentive interest.

When the last race was ended and the thousands were crowding out through the gates, Saxon heard his host accepting a dinner invitation for the evening.

"I shall have a friend stopping in town on his way East, whom I want you all to meet," explained Mr. Bellton, the prospective host. "He is one Señor Ribero, an attaché of a South American legation, and he may prove interesting."

Saxon caught himself almost frowning. He did not care for society's offerings, but the engagement was made, and he had now no alternative to adding his declaration of pleasure to that of his host. He was, however, silent to taciturnity as Steele's runabout chugged its way along in the parade of motors and carriages through the gates of the race-track inclosure. In his pupils, the note of melancholy unrest was decided, where ordinarily there was only the hint.

"There is time," suggested the host, "for a run out the Boulevard; I'd like to show you a view or two."

The suggestion of looking at a promising landscape ordinarily challenged Saxon's interest to the degree of enthusiasm. Now, he only nodded.

It was not until Steele, who drove his own car, stopped at the

top of the Iroquois Park hill that Saxon spoke. They had halted at the southerly brow of the ridge from which the eye sweeps a radius of twenty miles over purpled hills and polychromatic valleys, to yet other hills melting into a sky of melting turquois. Looking across the colorful reaches, Saxon gave voice to his enthusiasm.

They left the car, and stood on the rocks that jut out of the clay at the road's edge. Beneath them, the wooded hillside fell away, three hundred feet of precipitous slope and tangle. For a time, Saxon's eyes were busy with the avid drinking in of so much beauty, then once more they darkened as he wheeled toward his companion.

"George," he said slowly, "you told me that we were to go to a cabin of yours tucked away somewhere in the hills, and paint landscape. I caught the idea that we were to lead a sort of camp-life – that we were to be hermits except for the companionship of our palettes and nature and each other – and the few neighbors that one finds in the country, and – " The speaker broke off awkwardly.

Steele laughed.

"'It is so nominated in the bond.' The cabin is over there – some twenty miles." He pointed off across the farthest dim ridge to the south. "It is among hills where – but to-morrow you shall see for yourself!"

"To-morrow?" There was a touch of anxious haste in the inquiry.

"Are you so impatient?" smiled Steele.

Saxon wheeled on his host, and on his forehead were beads of perspiration though the breeze across the hilltops was fresh with the coming of evening. His answer broke from his lips with the abruptness of an exclamation.

"My God, man, I'm in panic!"

The Kentuckian looked up in surprise, and his bantering smile vanished. Evidently, he was talking with a man who was suffering some stress of emotion, and that man was his friend.

For a moment, Saxon stood rigidly, looking away with drawn brow, then he began with a short laugh in which there was no vestige of mirth:

"When two men meet and find themselves congenial companions," he said slowly, "there need be no questions asked. We met in a Mexican hut."

Steele nodded.

"Then," went on Saxon, "we discovered a common love of painting. That was enough, wasn't it?"

Steele again bowed his assent.

"Very well." The greater painter spoke with the painfully slow control of one who has taken himself in hand, selecting tone and words to safeguard against any betrayal into sudden outburst. "As long as it's merely you and I, George, we know enough of each other. When it becomes a matter of meeting your friends, your own people, you force me to tell you something more."

"Why?" Steele demanded; almost hotly. "I don't ask my

friends for references or bonds!"

Saxon smiled, but persistently repeated:

"You met me in Mexico, seven months ago. What, in God's name, do you know about me?"

The other looked up, surprised.

"Why, I know," he said, "I know – " Then, suddenly wondering what he did know, he stopped, and added lamely: "I know that you are a landscape-painter of national reputation and a damned good fellow."

"And, aside from that, nothing," came the quick response. "What I am on the side, preacher, porch-climber, bank-robber – whatever else, you don't know." The speaker's voice was hard.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, before you present me to your friends, to such people for example – well such people as I met to-day – you have the right to ask; and the unfortunate part of it is that, when you ask, I can't answer."

"You mean – " the Kentuckian halted in perplexed silence.

"I mean," said Saxon, forcing his words, "that God Almighty only knows who I am, or where I came from. I don't."

Of all the men Steele had ever known, Saxon had struck him, through months of intimacy, as the most normal, sane and cleanly constituted. Eccentricity was alien to him. In the same measure that all his physical bents were straight and clean-cut, so he had been mentally a contradiction of the morbid and irrational. The Kentuckian waited in open-eyed astonishment, gazing at the man

whose own words had just convicted him of the wildest insanity.

Saxon went on, and even now, in the face of self-conviction of lunacy, his words fell coldly logical:

"I have talked to you of my work and my travels during the past five or six years. I have told you that I was a cow-puncher on a Western range; that I drifted East, and took up art. Did I ever tell you one word of my life prior to that? Do you know of a single episode or instance preceding these few fragmentary chapters? Do you know who, or what I was seven years ago?"

Steele was dazed. His eyes were studiously fixed on the gnarled roots and twisted hole of a scrub oak that hung out over the edge of things with stubborn and distorted tenacity.

"No," he heard the other say, "you don't, and I don't."

Again, there was a pause. The sun was setting at their backs, but off to the east the hills were bright in the reflection that the western sky threw across the circle of the horizon. Already, somewhere below them, a prematurely tuneful whippoorwill was sending out its night call.

Steele looked up, and saw the throat of the other work convulsively, though the lips grimly held the set, contradictory smile.

"The very name I wear is the name, not of my family, but of my race. R. A. Saxon, Robert Anglo Saxon or Robert Anonymous Saxon – take your choice. I took that because I felt that I was not stealing it."

"Go on," prompted Steele.

"You have heard of those strange practical jokes which Nature sometimes – not often, only when she is preternaturally cruel – plays on men. They have pathological names for it, I believe – loss of memory?"

Steele only nodded.

"I told you that I rode the range on the Anchor-cross outfit. I did not tell you why. It was because the Anchor-cross took me in when I was a man without identity. I don't know why I was in the Rocky Mountains. I don't know what occurred there, but I do know that I was picked up in a pass with a fractured skull. I had been stripped almost naked. Nothing was left as a clew to identity, except this – "

Saxon handed the other a rusty key, evidently fitting an old-fashioned lock.

"I always carry that with me. I don't know where it will fit a door, or what lies behind that door. I only know that it is in a fashion the key that can open my past; that the lock which it fits bars me off from all my life except a fragment."

Steele mechanically returned the thing, and Saxon mechanically slipped it back into his pocket.

"I know, too, that a scar I wear on my right hand was not fresh when those many others were. That, also, belongs to the veiled years.

"Some cell of memory was pressed upon by a splinter of bone, some microscopic atom of brain-tissue was disturbed – and life was erased. I was an interesting medical subject, and was taken

to specialists who tried methods of suggestion. Men talked to me of various things: sought in a hundred ways to stimulate memory, but the reminder never came. Sometimes, it would seem that I was standing on the verge of great recollections – recollections just back of consciousness – as a forgotten name will sometimes tease the brain by almost presenting itself yet remaining elusive."

Steele was leaning forward, listening while the narrator talked on with nervous haste.

"I have never told this before," Saxon said. "Slowly, the things I had known seemed to come back. For example, I did not have to relearn to read and write. All the purely impersonal things gradually retrieved themselves, but, wherever a fact might have a tentacle which could grasp the personal – the ego – that fact eluded me."

"How did you drift into art?" demanded Steele.

"That is it: I drifted into it. I had to drift. I had no compass, no port of departure or destination. I was a derelict without a flag or name."

"At the Cincinnati Academy, where I first studied, one of the instructors gave me a hint. He felt that I was struggling for something which did not lie the way of his teaching. By that time, I had acquired some little efficiency and local reputation. He told me that Marston was the master for me to study, and he advised me to go further East where I could see and understand his work. I came, and saw, 'The Sunset in Winter.' You know the rest."

"But, now," Steele found himself speaking with a sense of

relief, "now, you are Robert A. Saxon. You have made yourself from unknown material, but you have made yourself a great painter. Why not be satisfied to abandon this unknown past as the past has abandoned you?"

"Wait," the other objected, with the cold emphasis of a man who will not evade, or seek refuge in specious alternatives.

"Forget to-night who I am, and to-morrow I shall have no assurance that the police are not searching for me. Why, man, I may have been a criminal. I have no way of knowing. I am hand-tied. Possibly, I have a wife and family waiting for me somewhere – needing me!"

His breath came in agitated gasps.

"I am two men, and one of them does not know the other. Sometimes, it threatens me with madness – sometimes, for a happy interval, I almost forget it. At first, it was insupportable, but the vastness of the prairie and the calm of the mountain seemed to soothe me into sanity, and give me a grip on myself. The starlight in my face during nights spent in the saddle – that was soothing; it was medicine for my sick brain. These things at least made me physically perfect. But, since yesterday is sealed, I must remain to some extent the recluse. The sort of intercourse we call society I have barred. That is why I am anxious for your cabin, rather than your clubs and your entertainments."

"You didn't have to tell me," said Steele slowly, "but I'm glad you did. I and my friends are willing to gauge your past by your present. But I'm glad of your confidence."

Saxon raised his face, and his eyes wore an expression of gratification.

"Yes, I'm glad I told you. If I should go out before I solve it, and you should ever chance on the answer, I'd like my own name over me – and both dates, birth as well as death. My work is, of course, to learn it all – if I can; and I hope – " he forced a laugh – "when I meet the other man, he will be fit to shake hands with."

"Listen," Steele spoke eagerly. "How long has it been?"

"Over six years."

"Then, why not go on and round out the seven? Seven years of absolute disappearance gives a man legal death. Let the old problem lie, and go forward as Robert Saxon. That is the simplest way."

The other shook his head.

"That would be an evasion. It would prove nothing. If I discover responsibilities surviving from the past, I must take them up."

"What did the physicians say?"

"They didn't know." Saxon shook his head. "Perhaps, some strong reminder may at some unwarned moment open the volume where it was closed; perhaps, it will never open. To-morrow morning, I may awaken Robert Saxon – or the other man." He paused, then added quietly: "Such an unplaced personality had best touch other lives as lightly as it can."

Steele went silently over, and cranked the machine. As he straightened up, he asked abruptly:

"Would you prefer calling off this dinner?"

"No." The artist laughed. "We will take a chance on my remaining myself until after dinner, but as soon as convenient – "

"To-morrow," promised Steele, "we go to the cabin."

CHAPTER III

Perhaps, the same futile vanity that led Mr. Bellton to import the latest sartorial novelties from the *Rue de la Paix* for the adornment of his person made him fond of providing foreign notables to give color to his entertainments.

Mr. Bellton was at heart the *poseur*, but he was also the fighter. Even when he carried the war of political reform into sections of the town where the lawless elements had marked him for violence, he went stubbornly in the conspicuousness of ultra-tailoring. Though he loved to address the proletariat in the name of brotherhood, he loved with a deeper passion the exclusiveness of presiding as host at a board where his guests included the "best people."

Señor Ribero, who at home used the more ear-filling entitlement of Señor Don Ricardo de Ribero y Pierola, was hardly a notable, yet he was a new type, and, even before the ladies had emerged from their cloak-room and while the men were apart in the grill, the host felt that he had secured a successful ingredient for his mixture of personal elements.

After the fashion of Latin-American diplomacy, educated in Paris and polished by great latitude of travel, the attaché had the art of small talk and the charm of story-telling. To these recommendations, he added a slender, almost military carriage, and the distinction of Castilian features.

A punctured tire had interrupted the homeward journey of Steele and Saxon, who had telephoned to beg that the dinner go on, without permitting their tardiness to delay the more punctual.

The table was spread in a front room with a balcony that gave an outlook across the broad lawn and the ancient trees which bordered the sidewalk. At the open windows, the May air that stirred the curtains was warm enough to suggest summer, and new enough after the lately banished winter to seem wonderful – as though the rebirth of nature had wrought its miracle for the first time.

Ribero was the only guest who needed presentation, and, as he bowed over the hand of each woman, it was with an almost ornate ceremoniousness of manner.

Duska Filson, after the spontaneous system of her opinions and prejudices, disliked the South American. To her imaginative mind, there was something in his jetlike darkness and his quick, almost tigerish movements that suggested the satanic. But, if the impression she received was not flattering to the guest, the impression she made was evidently profound. Ribero glanced at her with an expression of extreme admiration, and dropped his dark lashes as though he would veil eyes from which he could not hope to banish flattery too fulsome for new acquaintanceship.

The girl found herself seated with the diplomat at her right, and a vacant chair at her left. The second vacant seat was across the round table, and she found herself sensible of a feeling of quarantine with an uncongenial companion, and wondering who

would fill the empty space at her left. The name on the place card was hidden. She rather hoped it would be Saxon. She meant to ask him why he did not break away from the Marston influence that handicapped his career, and she believed he would entertain her. Of course, George Steele was an old friend and a very dear one, but this was just the point: he was not satisfied with that, and in the guise of lovers only did she ever find men uninteresting. It would, however, be better to have George make love than to be forced to talk to this somewhat pompous foreigner.

"I just met and made obeisance to the new Mrs. Billie Bedford," declared Mr. Bellton, starting the conversational ball rolling along the well-worn groove of gossip. "And, if she needs a witness, she may call on me to testify that she's as radiant in the part of Mrs. Billie as she was in her former rôle of Mrs. Jack."

Miss Buford raised her large eyes. With a winter's popularity behind her, she felt aggrieved to hear mentioned names that she did not know. Surely, she had met everybody.

"Who is Mrs. Bedford?" she demanded. "I don't think I have ever met her. Is she a widow?"

Bellton laughed across his consommé cup. "Of the modern school," he enlightened. "There were 'no funeral baked meats to furnish forth the marriage feast.' Matrimonially speaking, this charming lady plays in repertoire."

"What has become of Jack Spotswood?" The older Miss Preston glanced up inquiringly. "He used to be everywhere, and I haven't heard of him for ages."

"He's still everywhere," responded Mr. Bellton, with energy; "everywhere but here. You see, the papers were so busy with Jack's affairs that they crowded Jack out of his own life." Mr. Bellton smiled as he added: "And so he went away."

"I wonder where he is now. He wasn't such a bad sort," testified Mr. Cleaver, solemnly. "Jack's worse portion was his better half."

"Last heard," informed Mr. Bellton, "he was seen in some town in South America – the name of which I forget."

Señor Ribero had no passport of familiarity into local personalities, and he occupied the moment of his own conversational disengagement in a covert study of the face and figure beside him. Just now, the girl was looking away at the indolently stirring curtains with an expression of detachment. Flippant gossip was distasteful to her, and, when the current set that way, she drew aside, and became the non-participant.

Ribero read rightly the bored expression, and resolved that the topic must be diverted, if Miss Filson so wished.

"One meets so many of your countrymen in South America," he suggested, "that one might reasonably expect them to lose interest as types, yet each of them seems to be the center of some gripping interest. I remember in particular one episode – "

The recital was cut short by the entrance of Steele and Saxon. Ribero, the only person present requiring introduction, rose to shake hands.

The attaché was trained in diplomacy, and the rudiments of

diplomacy should teach the face to become a mask when need be, yet, as his eyes met those of Saxon, he suddenly and involuntarily stiffened. For just a moment, his outstretched hand hesitated with the impulse to draw back. The lips that had parted in a casual smile hardened rigidly, and the eyes that rested on the face of Steele's celebrity were so intently focused that they almost stared. The byplay occupied only a moment, and, as Ribero had half-turned from the table to greet those entering at his back, it escaped the notice of everyone except Saxon himself. The newcomer felt the momentary bar of hostility that had been thrown between them and as quickly withdrawn. The next moment, he was shaking the extended hand, and hearing the commonplace:

"Much pleased, señor."

Ribero felt a momentary flash of shame for the betrayal of such undiplomatic surprise, and made amends with added courtesy when he spoke.

The artist, dropping into his seat at the side of Miss Filson, felt a flush of pleasure at his position. For the instant, the other man's conduct became a matter of negligible importance, and, when she turned to him with a friendly nod and smile, he forgot Ribero's existence.

"Mr. Ribero," announced Mr. Bellton, "was just about to tell us an interesting story when you two delinquents came in. I'm sure he still has the floor."

The diplomat had forgotten what he had been saying. He

was covertly studying the features of the man just beyond Miss Filson. The face was turned toward the girl, giving him a full view, and it was a steady, imperturbable face. Now, introduced as raconteur, he realized that he must say something, and at the moment, with a flash of inspiration, he determined to relate a bit of history that would be of interest at least to the narrator. It was not at all the story he might have told had he been uninterrupted, but it was a story that appealed to his diplomatic taste, because he could watch the other face as he told it and see what the other face might betray. This newcomer had jarred him from his usual poise. Now, he fancied it was the other's turn to be startled.

"It was," he said casually, "the narrowest escape from death that I have seen – and the man who escaped was an American."

As Saxon raised his eyes, with polite interest, to those of the speaker, he became aware that they held for him a message of almost sardonic challenge. He felt that the story-teller was only ostensibly addressing the table; that the man was talking at him, as a prosecutor talks at the defendant though he may direct himself to the jury. The sense that brought this realization was perhaps telepathic. To the other eyes and ears, there were only the manner of the raconteur and the impersonal tone of generality.

"It occurred in Puerto Frio," said the South American, reminiscently. He paused for a moment, and smiled at Saxon, as though expecting a sign of confusion upon the mention of the name, but he read only courteous interest and impenetrability.

"This countryman of yours," he went on smoothly, his

English touched and softened by the accent of the foreigner, "had indulged in the dangerous, though it would seem alluring, pastime of promoting a revolution. Despite his unscrupulous character, he was possessed of an engaging personality, and, on brief acquaintance, I, for one, liked him. His skill and luck held good so long that it was only when the insurgents were at the gates of the capital that a summary court-martial gave him the verdict of death. I have no doubt that by the laws of war it was a just award, yet so many men are guilty of peddling revolutions, and the demand for such wares is so great in some quarters, that he had my sympathy." The speaker bowed slightly, as though conceding a point to a gallant adversary. It chanced that he was looking directly at Saxon as he bowed.

The painter became suddenly conscious that he was according an engrossed attention, and that the story-teller was narrowly watching his fingers as they twisted the stem of his sauterne glass. The fingers became at once motionless.

"He bore himself so undeniably well when he went out to his place against a blank wall in the plaza, escorted by the firing squad," proceeded Señor Ribero evenly, "that one could not withhold admiration. The picture remains with me. The sun on the yellow cathedral wall … a vine heavy with scarlet blossoms like splashes of blood … and twenty paces away the firing squad with their Mausers."

Once more, the speaker broke off, as though lost in retrospection of something well-remembered. Beyond the girl's

absorbed gaze, he saw that of the painter, and his dark eyes for an instant glittered with something like direct accusation.

"As they arranged the final details, he must have reflected somewhat grimly on the irony of things, for at that very moment he could hear the staccato popping of the guns he had smuggled past the vigilance of the customs. The sound was coming nearer – telling him that in a half-hour his friends would be victorious – too late to save him."

As Ribero paused, little Miss Buford, leaning forward across the table, gave a sort of gasp.

"He was tall, athletic, gray-eyed," announced the attaché irrelevantly; "in his eyes dwelt something of the spirit of the dreamer. He never faltered."

The speaker lifted his sauterne glass to his lips, and sipped the wine deliberately.

"The *teniente* in command inquired if he wished to pray," Ribero added then, "but he shook his head almost savagely. 'No, damn you!' he snapped out, as though he were in a hurry about it all, 'Go on with your rat-killing. Let's have it over with.'"

The raconteur halted in his narrative.

"Please go on," begged Duska, in a low voice. "What happened?"

The foreigner smiled.

"They fired." Then, as he saw the slight shudder of Duska's white shoulder, he supplemented: "But each soldier had left the task for the others… Possibly, they sympathized with him;

possibly, they sympathized with the revolution; possibly, each of the six secretly calculated that the other five would be sufficient. *Quien sabe?* At all events, he fell only slightly wounded. One bullet – " he spoke thoughtfully, letting his eyes drop from Saxon's face to the table-cloth where Saxon's right hand lay – "one bullet pierced his right hand from back to front."

Then, a half-whimsical smile crossed Ribero's somewhat saturnine features, for Miss Filson had dropped her napkin on Saxon's side, and, when the painter had stooped to recover it, he did not again replace the hand on the table.

"Before he could be fired on a second time," concluded the diplomat with a shrug, "a new *presidente* was on his way to the palace. Your countryman was saved."

If the hero of Ribero's narrative was a malefactor, at least he was a malefactor with the sympathy of Mr. Bellton's dinner-party, as was attested by a distinctly audible sigh of relief at the end of the story. But Señor Ribero was not quite through.

"It is not, after all, the story that discredits your countryman," he explained, "but the sequel. Of course, he became powerful in the new régime. It was when he was lauded as a national hero that his high fortunes intoxicated him, and success rotted his moral fiber. Eventually, he embezzled a fortune from the government which he had assisted to establish. There was also a matter of – how shall I say? – of a lady. Then, a duel which was really an assassination. He escaped with blood on his conscience, presumably to enjoy his stolen wealth in his own land."

"I have often wondered," pursued Ribero, "whether, if that man and I should ever be thrown together again, he would know me … and I have often wished I could remember him only as the brave adventurer – not also as the criminal."

As he finished, the speaker was holding Saxon with his eyes, and had a question in his glance that seemed to call for some expression from the other. Saxon bowed with a smile.

"It is an engrossing story."

"I think," said Duska suddenly, almost critically, "the first part was so good that it was a pity to spoil it with the rest."

Señor Ribero smiled enigmatically into his wine-glass.

"I fear, señorita, that is the sad difference between fiction and history. My tale is a true one."

"At all events," continued the girl with vigor, "he was a brave man. That is enough to remember. I think it is better to forget the rest."

It seemed to Ribero that the glance Saxon flashed on her was almost the glance of gratitude.

"What was his name?" she suddenly demanded.

"He called himself – at that time – George Carter," Ribero said slowly, "but gentlemen in the unrecognized pursuits quite frequently have occasion to change their names. Now, it is probably something else."

After the dinner had ended, while the guests fell into groups or waited for belated carriages, Saxon found himself standing apart, near the window. It was open on the balcony, and the man

felt a sudden wish for the quiet freshness of the outer air on his forehead. He drew back the curtain, and stepped across the low sill, then halted as he realized that he was not alone.

The sputtering arc-light swinging over the street made the intervening branches and leaves of the sidewalk sycamores stand out starkly black, like a ragged drop hung over a stage.

The May moon was only a thin sickle, and the other figure on the darkly shadowed balcony was vaguely defined, but Saxon at once recognized, in its lithe slenderness and grace of pose, Miss Filson.

"I didn't mean to intrude," he hastily apologized. "I didn't know you were here."

She laughed. "Would that have frightened you?" she asked.

She was leaning on the iron rail, and the man took his place at her side.

"I came with the Longmores," she explained, "and their machine hasn't come yet. It's cool here – and I was thinking – "

"You weren't by any chance thinking of Babylon?" he laughed, "or Macedonia?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Ribero's story sticks in my mind. It was so personal, and – I guess I'm a moody creature. Anyway, I find myself thinking of it."

There was silence for a space, except for the laughter that floated up from the verandah below them, where a few of the members sat smoking, and the softened clicking of ivory from the open windows of the billiard-room. The painter's fingers,

resting on the iron rail, closed over a tendril of clambering moon-flower vine, and nervously twisted the stem.

With an impulsive movement, he leaned forward. His voice was eager.

"Suppose," he questioned, "suppose you knew such a man – can you imagine any circumstances under which you could make excuses for him?"

She stood a moment weighing the problem. "It's a hard question," she replied finally, then added impulsively: "Do you know, I'm afraid I'm a terrible heathen? I can excuse so much where there is courage – the cold sort of chilled-steel courage that he had. What do you think?"

The painter drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his moist forehead, but, before he could frame his answer, the girl heard a movement in the room, and turned lightly to join her chaperon.

Following her, Saxon found himself saying good-night to a group that included Ribero. As the attaché shook hands, he held Saxon's somewhat longer than necessary, seeming to glance at a ring, but really studying a scar.

"You are a good story-teller, Mr. Ribero," said Saxon, quietly.

"Ah," countered the other quickly, "but that is easy, señor, where one has so good a listener. By the way, señor, did you ever chance to visit Puerto Frio?"

The painter shook his head.

"Not unless in some other life – some life as dead as that of

the pharaohs."

"Ah, well – " the diplomat turned away, still smiling – "some of the pharaohs are remarkably well preserved."

CHAPTER IV

Steele himself had not been a failure at his art. There was in him no want of that sensitive temperament and dream-fire which gives the artist, like the prophet, a better sight and deeper appreciation than is accorded the generality. The only note missing was the necessity for hard application, which might have made him the master where he was satisfied to be the dilettante. The extreme cleverness of his brush had at the outset been his handicap, lulling the hard sincerity of effort with too facile results. Wealth, too, had drugged his energies, but had not crippled his abilities. If he drifted, it was because drifting in smooth seas is harmless and pleasant, not because he was unseaworthy or fearful of stormier conditions. In Saxon, he had not only recognized a greater genius, but found a friend, and with the insouciance of a graceful philosophy he reasoned it out to his own contentment. Each craft after its own uses! Saxon was meant for a greater commerce. His genius was intended to be an argosy, bearing rich cargo between the ports of the gods and those of men. If, in the fulfillment of that destiny, the shallop of his own lesser talent and influence might act as convoy and guide, luring the greater craft into wider voyaging, he would be satisfied. Just now, that guidance ought to be away from the Marston influence where lay ultimate danger and limitation. He was glad that where people discussed Frederick Marston

they also discussed his foremost disciple. Marston himself had loomed large in the star-chart of painting only a dozen years ago, and was now the greatest of luminaries. His follower had been known less than half that long. If he were to surpass the man he was now content to follow, he must break away from Marston-worship and let his maturer efforts be his own – his ultimate style his own. Prophets and artists have from the beginning of time arisen from second place to a preëminent first – pupils have surpassed their teachers. He had hoped that these months in a new type of country and landscape would slowly, almost insensibly, wean Saxon away from the influence that had made his greatness and now in turn threatened to limit its scope.

The cabin to which he brought his guest was itself a reflection of Steele's whim. Fashioned by its original and unimaginative builders only as a shelter, with no thought of appearances, it remained, with its dark logs and white "chinking," a thing of picturesque beauty. Its generous stone chimneys and wide hearths were reminders of the ancient days. Across its shingled roof, the sunlight was spotted with shadows thrown down from beeches and oaks that had been old when the Indian held the country and the buffalo gathered at the salt licks. Vines of honeysuckle and morning-glory had partly preëmpted the walls. Inside was the odd mingling of artistic junk that characterizes the den of the painter.

Saxon's enthusiasm had been growing that morning since the automobile had left the city behind and pointed its course toward

the line of knobs. The twenty-mile run had been a panorama sparkling with the life of color, tempered with tones of richness and soft with haunting splendor. Forest trees, ancient as Druids, were playing at being young in the almost shrill greens of their leafage. There were youth and opulence in the way they filtered the sun through their gnarled branches with a splattering and splashing of golden light. Blossoming dogwood spread clusters of white amid endless shades and conditions of green, and, when the view was not focused into the thickness of woodland interiors, it offered leagues of yellow fields and tender meadows stretching off to soberer woods in the distance. Back of all that were the hills, going up from the joyous sparkle of the middle distance to veiled purple where they met the bluest of skies. Saxon's fingers had been tingling for a brush to hold and his lids had been unconsciously dropping, that his eyes might appraise the colors in simplified tones and values.

At last, they had ensconced themselves, and a little later Saxon emerged from the cabin disreputably clad in a flannel shirt and briar-torn, paint-spotted trousers. In his teeth, he clamped a battered briar pipe, and in his hand he carried an equally battered sketching-easel and paint-box.

Steele, smoking a cigar in a hammock, looked up from an art journal at the sound of a footstep on the boards.

"Did you see this?" he inquired, holding out the magazine. "It would appear that your eccentric demi-god is painting in Southern Spain. He continues to remain the recluse, avoiding the

public gaze. His genius seems to be of the shrinking type. Here's his latest sensation as it looks to the camera."

Saxon took the magazine, and studied the half-tone reproduction.

"His miracle is his color," announced the first disciple, briefly. "The black and white gives no idea. As to his personality, it seems to be that of the *poseur*– almost of the snob. His very penchant for frequent wanderings incognito and revealing himself only through his work is in itself a bid for publicity. He arrogates to himself the attributes of traveling royalty. For my master as the man, I have small patience. It's the same affectation that causes him to sign nothing. The arrogant confidence that no one can counterfeit his stroke, that signature is superfluous."

Steele laughed.

"Why not show him that some one can do it?" he suggested. "Why not send over an unsigned canvas as a Marston, and drag him out of his hiding place to assert himself and denounce the impostor?"

"Let him have his vanities," Saxon said, almost contemptuously. "So long as the world has his art, what does it matter?" He turned and stepped from the low porch, whistling as he went.

The stranger strolled along with a free stride and confident bearing, tempted by each vista, yet always lured on by other vistas beyond.

At last, he halted near a cluster of huge boulders. Below

him, the creek reflected in rippled counterpart the shimmer of overhanging greenery. Out of a tangle of undergrowth beyond reared two slender poplars. The middle distance was bright with young barley, and in the background stretched the hills in misty purple.

There, he set up his easel, and, while his eyes wandered, his fingers were selecting the color tubes with the deft accuracy of the pianist's touch on the keys.

For a time, he saw only the thing he was to paint; then, there rose before his eyes the face of a girl, and beyond it the sinister visage of the South American. His brow darkened. Always, there had lurked in the background of his thoughts a specter, some Nemesis who might at any moment come forward, bearing black reminders – possible accusations. At last, it seemed the specter had come out of the shadow, and taken the center of the stage, and in the spotlight he wore the features of Señor Ribero. He had intended questioning Ribero, but had hesitated. The thing had been sudden, and it is humiliating to go to a man one has never met before to learn something of one's self, when that man has assumed an attitude almost brutally hostile from the outset. The method must first be considered, and, when early that morning he had inquired about the diplomat, it had been to learn that a night train had taken the man to his legation in Washington. He must give the problem in its new guise reflection, and, meanwhile, he must live in the shadow of its possible tragedy.

There was no element of the coward's procrastination in

Saxon's thoughts. Even his own speculation as to what the other man might have been, had never suggested the possibility that he was a craven.

He held up his hand, and studied the scar. The bared forearm, under the uprolled sleeve, was as brown and steady as a sculptor's work in bronze.

Suddenly, he heard a laugh at his back, a tuneful laugh like a trill struck from a xylophone, and came to his feet with a realization of a blue gingham dress, a girlish figure, a sunbonnet and a huge cluster of dogwood blossoms. The sunbonnet and dogwood branches seemed conspiring to hide all the face except the violet eyes that looked out from them. Near by stood a fox terrier, silently and alertly regarding him, its head cocked jauntily to the side.

But, even before she had lowered the dogwood blossoms enough to reveal her face, the lancelike uprightness of her carriage brought recognition and astonishment.

"Do you mind my staring at you?" she demanded, innocently. "Isn't turn-about fair play?"

"But, Miss Filson," he stammered, "I – I thought you lived in town!"

"Then, George didn't tell you that we were to be the closest sort of neighbors?" The merriment of her laugh was spontaneous. She did not confide to Saxon just why Steele's silence struck her as highly humorous. She knew, however, that the place had originally recommended itself to its purchaser by reason of just

that exact circumstance – its proximity.

The man took a hasty step forward, and spoke with the brusqueness of a cross-examiner:

"No. Why didn't he tell me? He should have told me! He – " He halted abruptly, conscious that his manner was one of resentment for being led, unwarned, into displeasing surroundings, which was not at all what he meant. Then, as the radiant smile on the girl's face – the smile such as a very little girl might have worn in the delight of perpetrating an innocent surprise – suddenly faded into a pained wonderment, he realized the depth of his crudeness. Of course, she could not know that he had come there to run away, to seek asylum. She could not guess, that, in the isolation of such a life as his uncertainty entailed, associates like herself were the most hazardous; that, because she seemed to him altogether wonderful, he distrusted his power to quarantine his heart against her artless magnetism. As he stood abashed at his own crassness, he wanted to tell her that he developed these crude strains only when he was thrown into touch with so fine grained a nature as her own; that it was the very sense of his own pariah-like circumstance. Then, before she had time to speak, came a swift artistic leaping at his heart. He should have known that she would be here! It was her rightful environment! She belonged as inherently under blossoming dogwood branches as the stars belong beyond the taint of earth-smoke. She was a dryad, and these were her woods. After all, how could it matter? He had run away bravely. Now,

she was here also, and the burden of responsibility might rest on the woodsprites or the gods or his horoscope or wherever it belonged. As for himself, he would enjoy the present. The future was with destiny. Of course, friendship is safe so long as love is barred, and of course it would be only friendship! Does the sun shine anywhere on trellised vines with a more golden light than where the slopes of Vesuvius bask just below the smoking sands? He, too, would enjoy the radiance, and risk the crater.

She stood, not angry, but a trifle bewildered, a trifle proud in her attitude of uptilted chin. In all her little autocratic world, her gracious friendliness had never before met anything so like rebuff.

Then, having resolved, the man felt an almost boyish reaction to light-hearted gayety. It was much the same gay abandonment that comes to a man who, having faced ruin until his heart and brain are sick, suddenly decides to squander in extravagant and riotous pleasure the few dollars left in his pocket.

"Of course, George should have told me," he declared. "Why, Miss Filson, I come from the world where things are commonplace, and here it all seems a sequence of wonders: this glorious country, the miracle of meeting you again – after – " he paused, then smilingly added – "after Babylon and Macedonia."

"From the way you greeted me," she naïvely observed, "one might have fancied that you'd been running away ever since we parted in Babylon and Macedon. You must be very tired."

"I *am* afraid of you," he avowed.

She laughed.

"I know you are a woman-hater. But I was a boy myself until I was seventeen. I've never quite got used to being a woman, so you needn't mind."

"Miss Filson," he hazarded gravely, "when I saw you yesterday, I wanted to be friends with you so much that – that I ran away. Some day, I'll tell you why."

For a moment, she looked at him with a puzzled interest. The light of a smile dies slowly from most faces. It went out of his eyes as suddenly as an electric bulb switched off, leaving the features those of a much older man. She caught the look, and in her wisdom said nothing – but wondered what he meant.

Her eyes fell on the empty canvas. "How did you happen to begin art?" she inquired. "Did you always feel it calling you?"

He shook his head, then the smile came back.

"A freezing cow started me," he announced.

"A what?" Her eyes were once more puzzled.

"You see," he elucidated, "I was a cow-puncher in Montana, without money. One winter, the snow covered the prairies so long that the cattle were starving at their grazing places. Usually, the breeze from the Japanese current blows off the snow from time to time, and we can graze the steers all winter on the range. This time, the Japanese current seemed to have been switched off, and they were dying on the snow-bound pastures."

"Yes," she prompted. "But how did that – ?"

"You see," he went on, "the boss wrote from Helena to

know how things were going. I drew a picture of a freezing, starving cow, and wrote back, 'This is how.' The boss showed that picture around, and some folk thought it bore so much family resemblance to a starving cow that on the strength of it they gambled on me. They staked me to an education in illustrating and painting."

"And you made good!" she concluded, enthusiastically.

"I hope to make good," he smiled.

After a pause, she said:

"If you were not busy, I'd guide you to some places along the creek where there are wonderful things to see."

The man reached for his discarded hat.

"Take me there," he begged.

"Where?" she demanded. "I spoke of several places."

"To any of them," he promptly replied; "better yet, to all of them."

She shook her head dubiously.

"I ought not to begin as an interruption," she demurred.

"On the contrary," he argued confidently, "the good general first acquaints himself with his field."

An hour later, standing at a gap in a tangle of briar, where the paw-paw trees grew thick, he watched her crossing the meadow toward the roof of her house which topped the foliage not far away. Then, he held up his right hand, and scrutinized the scar, almost invisible under the tan. It seemed to him to grow larger as he looked.

CHAPTER V

Horton House, where Duska Filson made her home with her aunt and uncle, was a half-mile from the cabin in which the two painters were lodged. That was the distance reckoned via driveway and turnpike, but a path, linking the houses, reduced it to a quarter of a mile. This "air line," as Steele dubbed it, led from the hill where the cabin perched, through a blackberry thicket and paw-paw grove, across a meadow, and then entered, by a picket gate and rose-cumbered fence, the old-fashioned garden of the "big house."

Before the men had been long at their summer place, the path had become as well worn as neighborly paths should be. To the gracious household at Horton House, they were "the boys." Steele had been on lifelong terms of intimacy, and the guest was at once taken into the family on the same basis as the host.

"Horton House" was a temple dedicated to hospitality. Mrs. Horton, its delightful mistress, occasionally smiled at the somewhat pretentious name, but it had been "Horton House" when the Nashville stage rumbled along the turnpike, and the picturesque little village of brick and stone at its back had been the "quarters" for the slaves. It would no more do to rechristen it than to banish the ripened old family portraits, or replace the silver-laden mahogany sideboard with less antique things. The house had been added to from time to time, until it sprawled a

commodious and composite record of various eras, but the name and spirit stood the same.

Saxon began to feel that he had never lived before. His life, in so far as he could remember it, had been varied, but always touched with isolation. Now, in a family not his own, he was finding the things which had hitherto been only names to him and that richness of congenial companionship which differentiates life from existence. While he felt the wine-like warmth of it in his heart, he felt its seductiveness in his brain. The thought of its ephemeral quality brought him moments of depression that drove him stalking away alone into the hills to fight things out with himself. At times, his canvases took on a new glow; at times, he told himself he was painting daubs.

About a week after their arrival, Mrs. Horton and Miss Filson came over to inspect the quarters and to see whether bachelor efforts had made the place habitable.

Duska was as delighted as a child among new toys. Her eyes grew luminous with pleasure as she stood in the living-room of the "shack" and surveyed the confusion of canvases, charcoal sketches and studio paraphernalia that littered its walls and floor. Saxon had hung his canvases in galleries where the juries were accounted sternly critical; he had heard the commendation of brother artists generously admitting his precedence. Now, he found himself almost flutteringly anxious to hear from her lips the pronouncement, "Well done."

Mrs. Horton, meanwhile, was sternly and beneficently

inspecting the premises from living-room to pantry, with Steele as convoy, and Saxon was left alone with the girl.

As he brought canvas after canvas from various unturned piles and placed them in a favorable light, he found one at whose vivid glow and masterful execution, his critic caught her breath in a delighted little gasp.

It was a thing done in daring colors and almost blazing with the glare of an equatorial sun. An old cathedral, partly vine-covered, reared its yellowed walls and towers into a hot sky. The sun beat cruelly down on the cobbled street while a clump of ragged palms gave the contrasting key of shade.

Duska, half-closing her eyes, gazed at it with uptilted chin resting on slender fingers. For a time, she did not speak, but the man read her delight in her eyes. At last, she said, her voice low with appreciation:

"I love it!"

Turning away to take up a new picture, he felt as though he had received an accolade.

"It might have been the very spot," she said thoughtfully, "that Señor Ribero described in his story."

Saxon felt a cloud sweep over the sunshine shed by her praise. His back was turned, but his face grew suddenly almost gray.

The girl only heard him say quietly:

"Señor Ribero spoke of South America. This was in Yucatan."

When the last canvas had been criticized, Saxon led the girl out to the shaded verandah.

"Do you know," she announced with severe directness, "when I know you just a little better, I'm going to lecture you?"

"Lecture me!" His face mirrored alarm. "Do it now – then, I sha'n't have it impending to terrorize better acquaintance."

She gazed away for a time, her eyes clouding with doubt. At last, she laughed.

"It makes me seem foolish," she confessed, "because you know so much more than I do about the subject of this lecture – only," she added with conviction, "the little I know is right, and the great deal you know may be wrong."

"I plead guilty, and throw myself on the mercy of the court." He made the declaration in a tone of extreme abjectness.

"But I don't want you to plead guilty. I want you to reform."

Not knowing the nature of the reform required, Saxon remained discreetly speechless.

"You are the first disciple of Frederick Marston," she said, going to the point without preliminaries. "You don't have to be anybody's disciple. I don't know a great deal about art, but I've stood before Marston's pictures in the galleries abroad and in this country. I love them. I've seen your pictures, too, and you don't have to play tag with Frederick Marston."

For a moment, Saxon sat twisting his pipe in his fingers. His silence might almost have been an ungracious refusal to discuss the matter.

"Oh, I know it's sacrilege," she said, leaning forward eagerly, her eyes deep in their sincerity, "but it's true."

The man rose and paced back and forth for a moment, then halted before her. When he spoke, it was with a ring like fanaticism in his voice.

"There is no Art but Art, and Marston is her prophet. That is my Koran of the palette." For a while, she said nothing, but shook her head with a dissenting smile, which carried up the corners of her lips in maddeningly delicious fashion. Then, the man went on, speaking now slowly and in measured syllables:

"Some day – when I can tell you my whole story – you will know what Marston means to me. What little I have done, I have done in stumbling after him. If I ever attain his perfection, I shall still be as you say only the copyist – yet, I sometimes think I would rather be the true copyist of Marston than the originator of any other school."

She sat listening, the toe of one small foot tapping the floor below the short skirt of her gown, her brow delightfully puckered with seriousness. A shaft of sun struck the delicate color of her cheeks, and discovered coppery glints in her brown hair. She was very slim and wonderful, Saxon thought, and out beyond the vines the summer seemed to set the world for her, like a stage. The birds with tuneful delirium provided the orchestration.

"I know just how great he is," she conceded warmly; "I know how wonderfully he paints. He is a poet with a brush for a pen. But there's one thing he lacks – and that is a thing you have."

The man raised his brows in challenged astonishment.

"It's the one thing I miss in his pictures, because it's the one

thing I most admire – strength, virility." She was talking more rapidly as her enthusiasm gathered headway. "A man's pictures are, in a way, portraits of his nature. He can't paint strong things unless he is strong himself."

Saxon felt his heart leap. It was something to know that she believed his canvases reflected a quality of strength inherent to himself.

"You and your master," she went on, "are unlike in everything except your style. Can you fancy yourself hiding away from the world because you couldn't face the music of your own fame? That's not modesty – it's insanity. When I was in Paris, everybody was raving about some new pictures from his brush, but only his agent knew where he actually was, or where he had been for years."

"For the man," he acceded, "I have as small respect as you can have, but for the work I have something like worship! I began trying to paint, and I was groping – groping rather blindly after something – I didn't know just what. Then, one day, I stood before his 'Winter Sunset.' You know the picture?" She nodded assent. "Well, when I saw it, I wanted to go out to the Metropolitan entrance, and shout Eureka up and down Fifth Avenue. It told me what I'd been reaching through the darkness of my novitiate to grasp. It seemed to me that art had been revealed to me. Somehow," the man added, his voice falling suddenly from its enthused pitch to a dead, low one, "everything that comes to me seems to come by revelation!"

Into Duska's eyes came quick light of sympathy. He had halted before her, and now she arose impulsively, and laid a light hand for a moment on his arm.

"I understand," she agreed. "I think that for most artists to come as close as you have come would be triumph enough, but you – " she looked at him a moment with a warmth of confidence – "you can do a great deal more." So ended her first lesson in the independence of art, leaving the pupil's heart beating more quickly than at its commencement.

In the days that followed, as May gave way to June and the dogwood blossoms dropped and withered to be supplanted by flowering locust trees, Saxon confessed to himself that he had lost the first battle of his campaign. He had resolved that this close companionship should be platonically hedged about; that he would never allow himself to cross the frontier that divided the realm of friendship from the hazardous territory of love. Then, as the cool, unperfumed beauty of the dogwood was forgotten for the sense-steeping fragrance of the locust, he knew that he was only trying to deceive himself. He had really crossed this forbidden frontier when he passed through the gate that separated the grandstand at Churchill Downs from the club-house inclosure. With the realization came the resolution of silence. He was a man whose life might at any moment renew itself in untoward developments. Until he could drag the truth from the sphinx that guarded his secret, his love must be as inarticulate as was his sphinx. He spent harrowing afternoons

alone, and swore with many solemn oaths that he would never divulge his feelings, and, when he sought about for the most sacred and binding of vows, he swore by his love for Duska.

Because of these things, he sometimes shocked and startled her with sporadic demonstrations of the brusquerie into which he withdrew when he felt too potential an impulse urging him to the other extreme. And she, not understanding it, yet felt that there was some riddle behind it all. It pained and puzzled her, but she accepted it without resentment – belying her customary autocracy. While she had never gone into the confessional of her heart as he had done, these matters sometimes had the power of making her very miserable.

His happiest achievements resulted from sketching trips taken to points she knew in the hills. He had called her a dryad when she first appeared in the woods, and he had been right, for she knew all the twisting paths in the tangle of the knobs, unbroken and virgin save where the orchards of peach-growers had reclaimed bits of sloping soil. One morning at the end of June, they started out together on horseback, armed with painting paraphernalia, luncheon and rubber ponchos in the event of rain. For this occasion, she had saved a coign of vantage she knew, where his artist's eye might swing out from a shelving cliff over miles of checkered valley and flat, and league upon league of cloud and sky. She led the way by zigzag hill roads where they caught stinging blows from back-lashing branches and up steep, slippery acclivities. It was one of the times when Saxon was

drinking the pleasant nectar of to-day, refusing to think of to-morrow. She sang as she rode in advance, and he followed with the pleasure of a man to whom being unmounted brings a sense of incompleteness. He knew that he rode no better than she – and he knew that he could ride. In his ears was the exuberance of the birds saluting the morning, and in his nostrils the loamy aroma stirred by their horses' hoofs from the steeping fragrance of last year's leaves. At the end was a view that brought his breath in deep draughts of delight.

For two hours, he worked, and only once his eyes left the front. On that occasion, he glanced back to see her slim figure stretched with childlike and unconscious grace in the long grass, her eyes gazing unblinkingly and thoughtfully up to the fleece that drifted across the blue of the sky. Clover heads waved fragrantly about her, and one long-stemmed blossom brushed her cheek. She did not see him, and the man turned his gaze back to the canvas with a leap in his pulses. After that, he painted feverishly. Finally, he turned to find her at his elbow.

"What is the verdict?" he demanded.

She looked with almost tense eyes. Her voice was low and thrilled with wondering delight.

"There is something," she said slowly, "that you never caught before; something wonderful, almost magical. I don't know what it is."

With a swift, uncontrollable gesture, he bent a little toward her. His face was the face of a man whose heart is in insurrection.

His voice was impassioned.

"*I* know what it is," he cried. Then, as she read his look, her cheeks crimsoned, and it would have been superfluous for him to have added, "Love." He drew back almost with a start, and began to scrape the paint smears from his palette. He had quelled the insurrection. At least in words, he had not broken his vow.

For a moment, the girl stood silent. She felt herself trembling; then, taking refuge in childlike inconsequence, she peered over the edge of the cliff.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as though the last few moments had not been lived through, "there is the most wonderfulest flower!" Her voice was disappointment-laden. "And it's just out of reach."

Saxon had regained control of himself. He answered with a composure too calm to be genuine and an almost flippant note that rang false.

"Of course. The most wonderfulest things are always just out of reach. The edelweiss grows only among the glaciers, and the excelsior crop must be harvested on inaccessible pinnacles."

He came and looked over the edge, stopping close to her shoulder. He wanted to demonstrate his regained command of himself. A delicate purple flower hung on the cliff below as though it had been placed there to lure men over the edge.

He looked down the sheer drop, appraised with his eye the frail support of a jutting root, then slipped quietly over, resting by his arms on the ledge of rock and groping for the root with his toe.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.